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Iran

Sanctions or Collective Punishment?

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Iran is under severe sanctions these days. The EU's embargo against Iranian crude oil went into effect on July 1, 2012, adding to the US and UN economic sanctions, which went into effect in 2006.

The new EU sanctions, combined with intensifying US sanctions against the Central Bank of Iran and foreign financial institutions working with it, have already worsened the living conditions of the ordinary Iranian citizens who suffer as a result of the sanctions. The value of the Rial has been halved, inflation has increased dramatically and the purchasing power of the Iranians has diminished. Food prices, particularly for fruit, sugar, meat and poultry, have skyrocketed. Iranians are now forced to wait in long queues, as they did in the war years 30 years ago, to buy subsidized chicken.

Propagandized as an alternative to war and the only non-military measure available to stop Iran's nuclear program and authoritarian regime, the sanctions against Iran prove once again that sanctions are nothing but a form of collective punishment against innocent citizens. Sanctions are not a newly-discovered remedy for taming authoritarian regimes that are unpopular with the US and its western allies. Prior to the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003, Iraqi citizens suffered terribly under thirteen years of US-backed sanctions that denied millions of Iraqis of access to clean water, medicine and vital technologies. According to the World Health Organization, in just the first four years of sanctions, the child mortality rate in Iraq increased 500%. Blocking international trade and access to finance does not damage the existence of the Iranian regime as much as it devastates the day-to-day living conditions of ordinary people. The black market as a rule owes its existence to the restrictions on the legal market and it is highly controlled by political elites.

Sanctions have not only affected the lives of Iranians living in Iran. They have also been subject to 'unique' interpretations that have affected Iranians living abroad. In the US state of Georgia, for instance, Persian-speaking clients were refused service at an Apple computer store. In the Netherlands, the Foreign Minister announced – before the EU sanctions had even gone into effect – that the Dutch government would not renew the resident permits of Iranian researchers and specialists working in Dutch universities and research institutes. After protests, both from within and outside the Netherlands, this policy was revised to only apply to researchers working in the petroleum, natural gas and petrochemical industries in an attempt to keep "certain knowledge" from being transferred back to Iran. However, the boundaries of this "certain knowledge" is kept loose and researchers working in other technological realms are forced to prove their exemption from the law on a case-by-case basis.

Sanctions are often presented as an alternative to war and an effective means to bring authoritarian regimes into compliance with international demands. The history of sanctions, however, proves otherwise. Sanctions are not only often a prelude to war but are themselves a form of warfare perpetrated not against the governing elites but against ordinary people. The people of Iran have been struggling against their regime from the time of its founding. Destroying their basic living conditions and blocking their access to information, communication and technology will only strengthen the regime that they are struggling against.